

A Study on the Effective Implementation of English Writing Center in an EFL Setting from Korean University Students Perspective

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1. Introduction

Writing centers in native English speaking countries have become important resources for second language (L2) learners. L2 learners rely on writing centers to get help in unfamiliar cultural, rhetorical, and linguistic writing contexts in American colleges (Harris & Silva, 1993). College professors may send their L2 students to writing centers because of frustration, or because they think of their students' second language problems as not part of their job (Zamel, 1995). Also, university professors assume that L2 students' language proficiency is not an issue and that their language problems should be taken care of before admission to the university (Zamel, 1995). Establishing English Writing Centers (EWCs) especially designed for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) has stimulated interest; however, there are not many EWCs in Korean universities. Some universities in Korea primarily operate writing centers in their first language, where students get help for their university classes' general academic writing. A rising number of Korean universities are offering courses taught in English and students maintain that they have difficulty in academic English writing. Korean university students may have had little experience with both L1 and L2 writing and therefore, doing English writing assignments, or publishing research papers in English is a big challenge to them. Also, students or their instructors perceive that students need to improve their writing skills, but it is difficult to find a place to learn and practice writing skills. However, it is important to acknowledge that EFL learners are not only learning to write in a second language, but they are also learning a second language (Harris and Silva, 1993). The research questions were the following: a) what are the students' main purposes of visiting EWCs, and b) how do students feel about their English writing.

2. Method

The Catholic University of Korea is a medium-sized university. Many courses are taught in English, so there is a need for English language support. The EWC was established in March 2011 to help students become competent writers of English texts. It has an active website where students can upload his or her works or write essays directly on the website. Students can check advisor's comments and sign up for a face-to-face consultation for their works. The participants of this study were 492 university students (176 males and 316 females) from 40 different majors. The students were asked to join the EWC website and the data were collected online. When they first joined the EWC website, they were given a Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) consisting of 13 pre-survey questions (Richmond, V. P., & McCroskey, J. C. (1998). After the students registered on the EWC website, they were asked to submit an argumentative essay then get a face-to-face consultation with an EWC advisor. With the feedback, they asked to revise their essays and submit the second draft to the advisor. After the submission of the second draft submission, students were asked to evaluate the EWC advisors.

3. Result

Data analysis indicates that most of the participants visit EWC because they have difficulty in academic English writing in their classes, which are taught in English. 52.0% of the participants came to the EWC to complete mandatory class assignments. Participants preferred to obtain assistance in English writing, including grammar, organization, word choice, and coherence. Among the EWC participants, 51.7% were sophomore and senior students, and the rest were freshmen and juniors. Students of English related majors visited EWC the most, while the numbers of engineering and science students were low. Most students preferred to get assistance in English academic writing but senior students use EWC as a preparation for their respective careers. WAT test results showed that majority of the students were not sure about their English writing level and indicated "neutral" in the pre-survey. However, for question items number 5 and 7, participants indicated that expressing ideas in English through writing is valuable. Also, participants were not sure if people would enjoy what they wrote (Figure 1). Students' evaluation showed that they were satisfied with face-to-face consultations. Their comments included "I want to recommend EWC to others.", "Advisor was very nice and kind.", and "EWC was helpful."

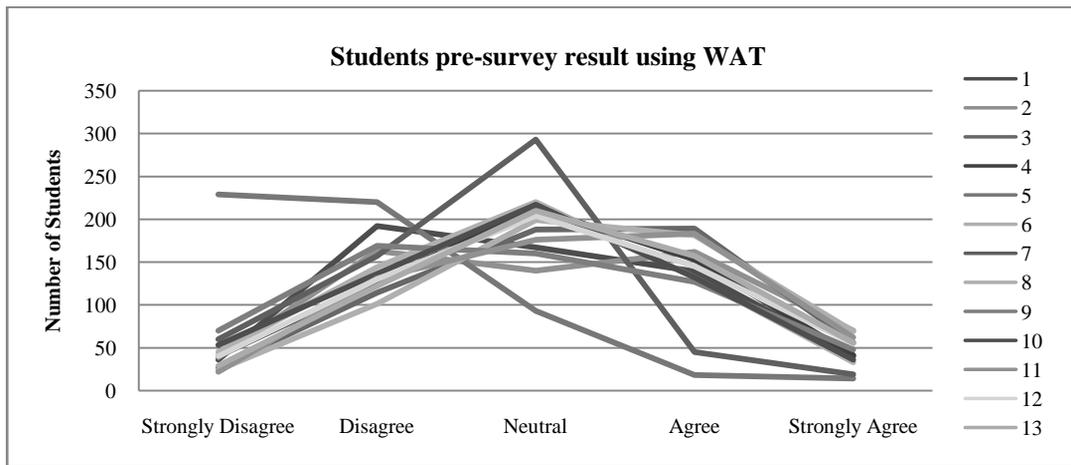


Figure 1. Students' pre-survey result

4. Discussion

More than half of the participants visited the EWC because of their class assignments. Students acknowledged that they have difficulty in English writing but they did not have a clear idea on how to improve their English writing skills. Students were not aware of the EWC until their professors required them to visit it as a class assignment. Survey results suggest that the EWC was not properly promoted among students and that the means on how to encourage students' active participation should be considered. Sophomores visited the EWC because they were preparing English documents to go overseas as an exchange student, while senior students visited the EWC to prepare writing their English resumes. The EWC in a native English setting, has the main focus of helping students with their academic English skills. However, in EFL settings, there were various purposes as to why students' visit the EWC. In order to provide proper help to EFL learners, it is essential to understand EFL learners themselves and to study how to increase the effectiveness of face-to-face consultations. In order to strengthen L2 consultations, proper L2 staff training is essential. But in EFL settings, it is difficult to train advisors and tutors. Effective training to lessen the effects of turnover and inexperience is critical in EFL settings; however, writing centers typically share certain operating conditions, such as shoe-string budgets and constantly changing staff members. Implementation of the EWC is complicated, especially in EFL settings. Data analysis showed that despite of their lack of knowledge of an EWC, the participants perceived an EWC to be of great necessity and help to them.

5. Direction for Future Studies

EWCs currently existing in Korean universities' follow the native English setting style; main structure, feedback types, and advisors. In L1 writing centers, the advisors or tutors are someone who have knowledge in L1 language and who follow a writing manual in face-to-face consultations. However, EWCs in EFL settings should be operated differently. When students visit EWCs, they perceive the EWC's main function as a place to get proofreading. Some students visit the EWC with specific purposes but others visit it because their professors sent them to complete their class assignment. EWC in EFL settings should be operated to give effective feedbacks to students. The participants may also prefer to have native English speakers or bilingual speakers, or someone who has good English background and training. The types of feedback and advisors should also be investigated in future studies. In future studies, students' essays will be analyzed and both pre- and post-survey results will be compared. This study may inspire more research interest in developing EWCs in EFL settings in Korean universities.

6. References

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